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Trip Report – Nehru Zoological Park, May 16, 2016

Dr Jayati Mitra

Indian Peafowl (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

The Nehru Zoological Park, with its lush green lawns, interspersed with tall trees and surrounded by swamps and water bodies, is a natural haven for the local species as well as migratory birds. After a long spell of harsh summer, the recent thundershowers had lowered the temperature considerably. This trip was planned on a Monday morning to enable us to study the birds without the usual cacophony created by the surging crowd on other days.

The weather was partially cloudy, with a cool breeze blowing steadily. As we reached the gates, it was a pleasant surprise to be greeted by a group of bright smiling kids who had taken the pains to wake up early and had accompanied their parents to pursue their hobby.

At the entrance, cute electric cars were lined up to take us around the zoo. We saw Pale-billed Flowerpeckers (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*) chirping and flying around atop the trees near the gate. We moved along and turned towards the nearby pond. The *gulmohar* trees lined along the roadside were in full bloom creating a red hue along the whole stretch. Slowly the fence of the nearby pond became visible, and we stepped out of the car and walked towards the pond.

A flock of Yellow-billed Babblers (*Turdoides affinis*) were hopping and foraging on the ground, but as we looked over the fence we noticed a Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*) sitting quietly at the edge of the pond looking intently into the water.

Pied Kingfisher (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

Suddenly it took off and flew towards the centre of the pond, and started hovering over the water. Its wings rapidly moved in circular motions while it, seemingly, remained fixed at the spot in mid-air till it dived vertically, splashing into the water to catch a silvery fish within its beak. It flew back swiftly to its original position, where it ate the prized catch, relishing every bit. The same feat was repeated several times in different directions by the bird that was never to miss its target till it was fully satiated. Birders never seem to tire of this scene; everyone enjoyed the action till the end.

Rose-ringed Parakeet (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

As the sun came out from between the clouds, a flock of Rose-ringed Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) flew up in the bright sky, chattering continuously. An Oriental Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) foraged on the ground while an Indian Grey Hornbill (*Ocyceros birostris*) also showed its presence in flight.

We stopped by the swamp where a pair of Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) was sitting still. Observing the red eyes of these birds was a pleasure.

Black-crowned Night Heron (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

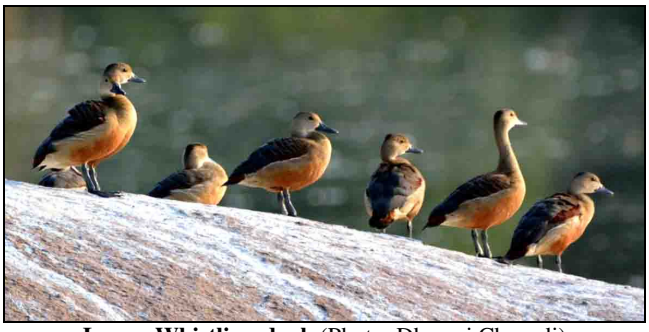
Nearby in the shady canopy of the tamarind tree, a Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*) was seen moving deeper and deeper inside the foliage till it disappeared from our view.

Spotted Owlet (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

A broken stump on the other side caught our attention. In full view was a Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) building its nest. Its long claws gripped the trunk firmly as it dug its beak in and rocked its head from side to side while digging the hole. From time to time it crossed over to the opposite side, observed the nest and returned back to work, trying to make it perfectly round.

Streaked Weaver (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

In the adjacent bulrushes, a colony of Streaked Weavers (*Ploceus manyar*) were very active. A nest looking like a neatly woven basket was clearly visible. Quite a few birds were in their breeding plumage, their intense yellow heads glistening in the sunlight. Yellow (*Ixobrychus sinensis*) and Cinnamon Bitterns (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*) were flying overhead. The latter was also seen resting for a while on the distant palms.



Lesser Whistling-duck (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

In the water body, Lesser Whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*) were resting in the shallow waters while Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), Bronze-winged Jacanas (*Metopidius indicus*) and a lone Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) waded along the bank.

White-breasted Waterhen (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

As we arrived near the peacock enclosure it was a pleasure to see the Black-rumped Flameback (*Dinopium benghalense*) in flight. Indian Golden Orioles (*Oriolus kundoo*) and Black Drongos (*Dicrurus macrocercus*) as usual were sighted flying near each other.

By now, we were moving towards the other side when a harsh call of *ke-ke-ke* was heard. A Rufous Treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) was diving down between the rocks frequently searching for insects.

Rufous Treepie (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

The only raptor we could see was a Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) perched on a distant branch. Maybe the clouds were a deterrent for these flying species.

Black Kite (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

By this time we had circled towards the gate, when we sighted a brown-looking bird sitting on the fence. It was the Common Hawk Cuckoo (*Hierococcyx varius*). It is a very pretty bird with a yellow ring around the eye and barring on its breast and tail. How beautifully it imitates the juvenile Shikra, except for its straight round bill. This bird is usually quite shy, though it continuously keeps calling in a crescendo which sounds like the words 'brain fever'. Like other cuckoos, it lays its eggs in other birds' nests. Today it was oblivious of our presence and kept on flying up and down, feeding on insects present on the ground.

The kids got absorbed looking at the caged birds in the zoo and naturally the often-asked question came to my mind; is it right to keep birds in captivity, and do they miss their natural surroundings? But sometimes it is necessary to do this, for studying their habits and also for breeding in captivity, especially if the species is an endangered one.

Painted Stork (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

By now we were back again at the gate and slowly one by one we dispersed, hoping to meet again at another place soon.

A list of the species seen is given below:

Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name		Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name
1	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	Dicaeum erythrorhynchos		23	Bronze-winged Jacana	Metopidius indicus
2	House Crow	Corvus splendens		24	Yellow Bittern	Ixobrychus sinensis
3	Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis		25	Indian Pond Heron	Ardeola grayii
4	Pied Kingfisher	Ceryle rudis		26	Black Kite	Milvus migrans
5	White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis		27	Clamorous Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus stentoreus
6	Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax		28	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea
7	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea		29	Great Egret	Casmeridius albus
8	Indian Grey Hornbill	Ocyceros birostris		30	Oriental Magpie Robin	Copsychus saularis
9	Rose-ringed Parakeet	Psittacula krameri		31	Yellow-billed Babbler	Turdoides affinis
10	Spotted Dove	Stigmatopelia chinensis		32	White-breasted Waterhen	Amaurornis phoenicurus
11	Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus		33	Spotted Owlet	Athene brama
12	White-browed Wagtail	Motacilla maderaspatensis		34	Black-rumped Flameback	Dinopium benghalenese
13	Coppersmith Barbet	Megalaima haemacephala		35	Black Drongo	Dicrurus macrocercus
14	Indian Peafowl	Pavo cristatus		36	Rufous Treepie	Dendrocitta vagabunda
15	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		37	Common Hawk Cuckoo	Hierococcyx varius
16	Purple Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio		38	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus
17	Streaked Weaver	Ploceus manyar		39	Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis
18	Lesser Whistling-duck	Dendrocygna javanica		40	Little Cormorant	Phalacrocorax niger
19	Indian Spot-billed Duck	Anas poecilorhyncha		41	Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis
20	Cinnamon Bittern	Ixobrychus cinnamomeus		42	Indian Golden Oriole	Oriolus kundoo
21	Asian Koel	Eudynamys scolopaceus		43	Red-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus cafer
22	Ashy Prinia	Prinia socialis				

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Birding for Life!

Srikanth Bhamidipati

"Bring nature to life" - whenever I hear these words, the one thing which comes to my mind is birding! Do it in your yard or hike through the bushes or cross the streams, birding can be comforting and can also give you the adrenaline rush which many people crave. Birding can be done by anyone, anywhere; you just need to have some inclination towards the activity, and it will enrich your lifestyle and your perception of the world.

There are many benefits of birding, one of them being connecting with new people or with your loved ones. Birding as a family activity is known to improve the quality of relationships in the family. In the daily hustle and bustle of the concrete jungle, where every relationship is tested from time to time, birding provides a means to connect with your loved ones and spend some quality time together.

And you know what: birding has health benefits too! Through bird-watching you get out in the open and get to breathe some fresh air. I'm sure everyone is aware of how Vitamin-D is synthesized in our body in the presence of sunlight. Strolling during bird walks is a great exercise and helps us reduce stress levels in our bodies. The psychological training to learn new things contributes to enhanced growth of the brain. Recognising bird species, learning about their physical features, understanding their habits and habitat and collectively binding them to memory, is an intellectual activity which improves our focus and increases the overall brain power. Last but not the least, the good, real, unrestrained, hearty laughs we have during our conversations relieves anger, tension and hostility by over 80%!

Birding benefits children too. Children are naturally inquisitive and love to absorb new things. Through bird-watching, we can get them outdoors and away from their mobiles, computers, I-pads and Gameboys! Backyard birding is the best place to start with kids; understanding which birds are visiting our backyards and studying their behaviour is easy. Inspiring them to build habitats for birds, designing a bird bath or building a feeder and planting a few trees will not only make a difference in the environment, it will be good learning for the kids, and others, to preserve nature. What a birding enthusiast needs – the patience to stand quietly, and the readiness to accept what comes his way – are also important life skills.

Birding is quickly becoming one of India's most popular interests and has enthusiasts spanning all age groups, from the fledglings to the senior citizens. This activity can be indulged in by everyone: all you need to do is start watching (whether out in the field or from your own window). This growing interest in birding can help conserve habitat. Regular participation in our local birding activities helps us connect with different people from diverse backgrounds, as well as understand bird behaviour, a fascinating subject.

Data submitted to organizations like eBird, BNHS and other such organizations helps in assessing the density of the bird populations and species trends for the region. This data acts as a basis for drafting different conservation plans, and helps execute them efficiently. It, therefore, follows that one has to be responsible when documenting and sending data, which will help the analysts and the planners to draft conservation strategies effectively.

Our lives are so hectic and crammed with tension that it is essential for us to spend time unwinding, every now and then. As the famous saying goes, "*Birds of a feather flock together*". So let's head out, socialize and participate in bird-watching events.

Watch birds… they make you look up! Happy Birding!

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The Story of the Home-maker

Text and photos: Col S S Cheema (Retd)

Baya Weaver with nesting material

I will start this with a disclaimer – a home-builder and a home-maker are not the same. The home-builder constructs the home – brick by brick or, as in our story, thread by thread – the home-maker makes this place a home. Today I will talk about one such home-maker…

My fascination for Baya Weavers is not new. I remember, as a kid, looking up at these beautiful nests in trees – sometimes carrying one home to make it a piece of my decoration. Several times I wondered why the nests were usually abandoned when I saw them. It was only by observing these beautiful birds over many years that I understood the entire process.

When I say beautiful, I mean every letter of the word! Without rubbing our lady readers on the wrong side, the word 'beauty' is more apt to males in the bird world than to the ladies, hence to start where I left off – the BEAUTIFUL males carry yellow crowns and yellow breasts, with black masks over their faces.

The breeding starts with the arrival of monsoons. The males attain their yellow breeding plumage at approximately one-and-a-half years of age, and start looking for places to build the nest. Though the nests have sometimes been found at isolated places, the birds as a rule build nests in colonies of 15 to 20. There are some very strict rules governing the colony – the nests are generally on the eastern side of the tree – perhaps saving them from the punishing winds of the South-west monsoons. If the colony is established on trees of lower height, they are generally built where they hang over water, and are not so easy to approach. Thorny bushes are also preferred locations for the low colonies. The colony also has to be near a source of 'building material' and wet mud. If the colony is established on tall trees, then the thorny bush clause is struck off, with the tall palm trees being preferred.

After the colony location is shortlisted and approved by the house of majority, the males are a flurry of activity. They choose the branch where the new house is to be built and they get that first thin strip of reed to make the knot. Each thread, stripped and incorporated into the nest, is 20 to 60 cm long. The male takes almost 18 days to build the nest, making up to 500 trips to complete one. The first knot takes time and I have seen many a male struggling, making multiple attempts. After this the male makes multiple trips to get one string at a time and weave it to make the nest.

Baya Weaver (Male) with incomplete nest

With the nest just about 1/4th done – the male starts advertising the property – after all, if he sells the house right, he gets the home-maker! The females – not unlike our species – observe from a distance and come near the colony from time to time in a group. Whenever females approach the colony, it is a flurry of activity again – the males chirp at the top of their voices to attract a mate, making full show of the plumage, hanging from their (own) nests. Many a times the nests are not approved of and the female tears it from the base, letting it fall to the ground. This treatment is meted out even to nests that are almost complete or fully complete. The male has no choice but to start all over again. This continues till the nest is complete and a lady bird approves of it.

Baya Weaver (Female)

The nests are pendulous with a retort shape and a long, vertical tube that leads to the nesting chamber. The nests are weighed down or lined with dung or mud. Adding weight at the right places gives it more stability. Once the nest is chosen by the female, the inner layers are done almost exclusively by the female. She lines it with mud and other soft material, converting this nest to a home.

Recently, acknowledging that the Weavers' numbers have dwindled over the years, BNHS initiated a count across the country. I am writing this article to acknowledge these tiny birds that, because of human greed and intervention, are being pushed to a stage where they are becoming rarer and more difficult to see and admire. It would be unfortunate if the next generation did not get to see this magical home-building in nature.

Baya Weaver (Male) with completed nest

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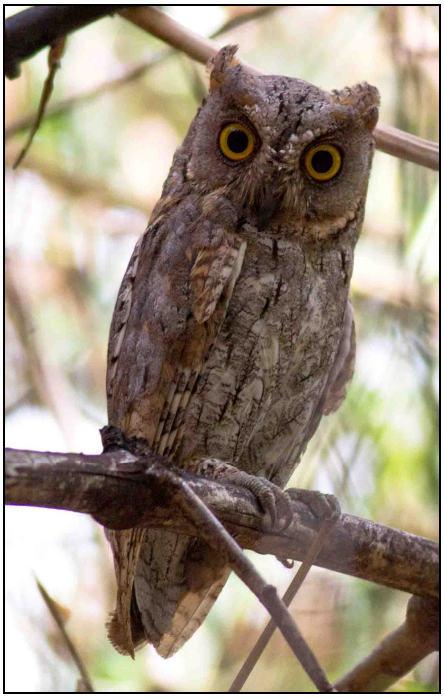
Bird of the Month

Text: Umesh Mani; Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati

Oriental Scops Owl (*Otus sunia*)



Oriental Scops Owl (Mallelatheertham, Srisailam District, 29-05-2016)

Order: Strigiformes
Family: Strigidae
Genus: *Otus*
Species: *O. sunia*
Size: 18-21 cm

Description & distribution: The Oriental Scops Owl is found from North Pakistan eastwards across India and Nepal, and from Japan to eastern Siberia, Manchuria, eastern China, Taiwan, the Malay Peninsula, Sri Lanka and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. It is fairly common in most parts of its range, but is more often heard than seen.

It is a small owl, around the same size as a Spotted Owlet. There are two morphs, rufous and grey, but intermediate forms are also known to occur. The rufous morph shows a pale rufous facial disc, with a narrow dark rim, and the blackish-grey bill shows a little white around the base. It has yellow eyes with white eyebrows. It has a smudged rufous, black and white collar on its hindneck. The upperparts are quite plain rufous, with dark streaking on forehead and crown; the scapulars sport whitish-buff spots with blackish edges. The underparts are somewhat pale black/dark grey, turning to buffish-white towards the belly. Neck and breast feathers have dark shaft-streaks with fine horizontal vermiculations, giving a faint 'herringbone' appearance. It has tarsi feathered till the greyish-brown toes; claws are blackish-brown. The wings and tail are banded.

The grey morph, on the other hand, is more spotted/streaked above, while the underparts are similar to the rufous morph, except with brownish- or reddish-grey ground colour. The sexes are alike in both morphs, but females are usually heavier than males.

Habitat & behaviour: The Oriental Scops Owl is usually found in open or partially open woodland, parks, grasslands with scattered trees, and riverside forest patches. It is a nocturnal bird; roosting singly, and occasionally in small groups, in dense foliage or tree holes, during the day, and becoming active after dusk. It may hunt either from a perch or in flight. Its diet consists mainly of insects and spiders, though it may occasionally take small vertebrates. Its call is a three-syllable sequence of throaty *tuk-tuk-turuk*, with the rhythm fairly variable in different parts of its range.

Nesting: The Oriental Scops Owl breeds from February to May, usually in holes in walls or trees, though it has been known to use nesting boxes. Pairs may sing in duets during courtship. The 3 to 4 white eggs are usually incubated by the female, while the male provides food during the period.

Local name: The Oriental Scops Owl is known as *'bharati chuggad'* in Gujarati, *'chitta guba'* or *'yerra chitta guba'* in Telugu, and *'chinna aandai'* in Tamil.

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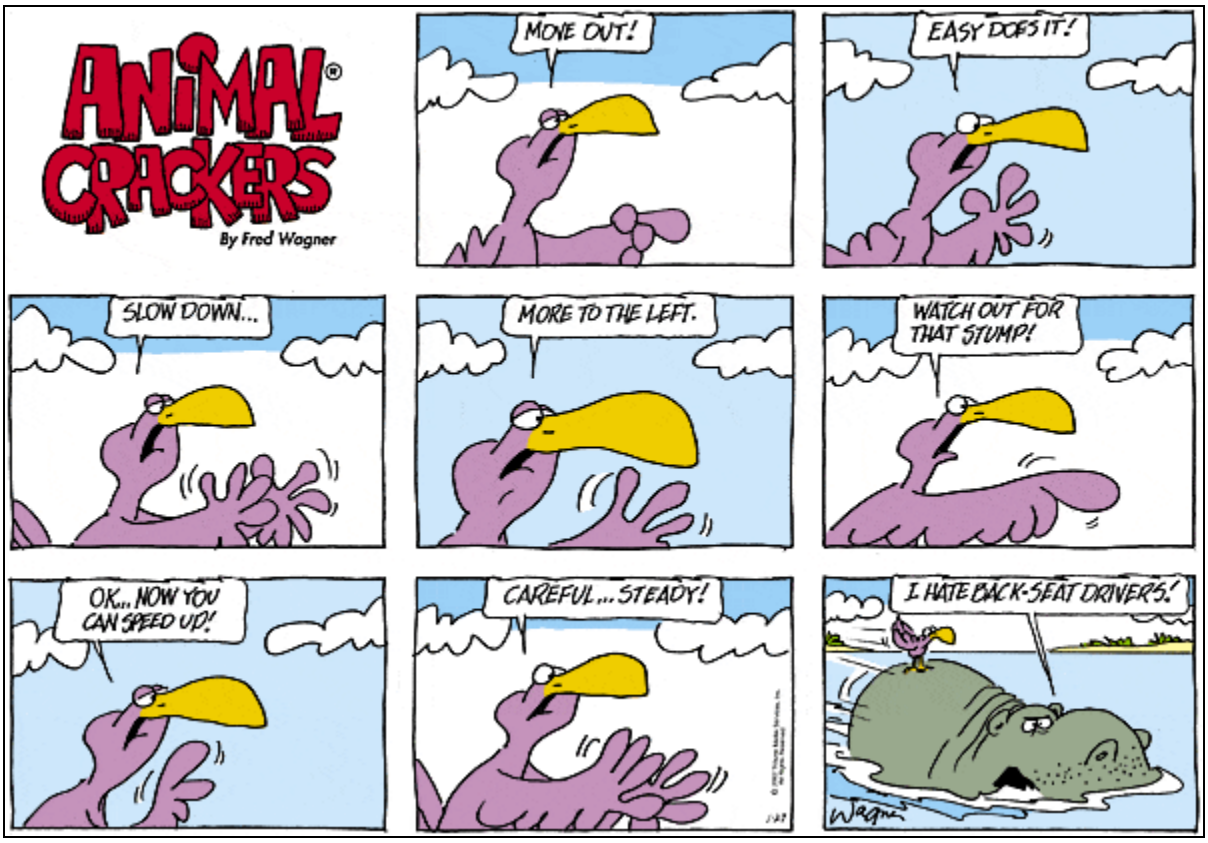
Bird Humour



(Animal Crackers by Fred Wagner, 27-01-2002)